

Lithuanian to the Core

Vytautas Landsbergis

By ESTHER B. FEIN

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VILNIUS, Lithuania, March 25 — Vytautas Landsbergis, who presides over Lithuania in its battle for sovereignty, seems an unlikely man to be thrust into a confrontation with a superpower.

Man
in the
News

A stooped, introspective music professor given to rumpled suits and sensible shoes, the 57-year-old Mr. Landsbergis sometimes appears even to members of his own team to be miscast as the adversary of the polished master of Soviet politics, President Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

"He is not Ronald Reagan," conceded Romualdas Ozolas, a longtime comrade of Mr. Landsbergis in the leadership of the pro-independence movement, Sajudis, and now a Deputy Prime Minister in the new Lithuanian government.

"He is not handsome," Mr. Ozolas said. "He is not smooth. He is not especially articulate. But he is principled and firm in his convictions and morality. And right now we do not have the luxury to choose a president who can both put forth ideas and have a pretty face."

Representing a Clean Break

The Lithuanian Parliament named Mr. Landsbergis to lead the republic in its defiant assertion of independence in large part because as a child of the old Lithuanian intellectual aristocracy and a lifelong non-Communist he represented a clean break with 50 years of Communist rule.

But as Moscow puts pressure on Lithuania, staging displays of military strength and issuing demands of fealty, some people here are beginning to wonder whether Mr. Landsbergis has the political skill to deal with Mr. Gorbachev or the personal charisma to reassure his own people.

When Mr. Gorbachev visited Lithuania in January, two months before the proclamation of independence, Mr. Landsbergis greeted him as "the leader of a friendly neighboring country," an undiplomatic gesture that noticeably angered the Soviet leader.

Mr. Landsbergis coolly ignored Moscow's appeals and pressed for independence on March 11, embarrassing Mr. Gorbachev on the eve of an important congress in Moscow.

Publicly, members of Sajudis and legislators put great stock in Mr. Landsbergis's thoughtfulness and his history as a conciliator in the leadership of the independence movement since its formation in the summer of 1988. As the chairman of Sajudis, he earned the nickname "gudri lape," Lithuanian for the clever fox.

Lack of Experience Seen

But privately, some of them acknowledge that he lacks the experience at negotiation and compromise that characterized his chief rival for the job, Algirdas Brazauskas, the popular and pragmatic head of the independent Communist Party of Lithuania. Mr. Brazauskas led the local party in a break from Moscow.

"I think our new leader does not quite understand that we are really in a very dangerous situation," said Justas J. Paleckas, ideology chief of the breakaway Communist Party and a member of Parliament.

"We must understand that in this period, good relations with Moscow should be the No. 1 priority for us," he said. "It is not practical to be only idealistic and principled, and I am not sure Mr. Landsbergis knows how to navigate between the two."

Among the republic's Russian and Polish minorities, he is also viewed with some misgiving, although he is fluent in Russian and Polish — he speaks passable English, too — and often addressed rallies in three languages as a gesture of good will.

But Mr. Landsbergis has the affection and support of many Lithuanians less for his recent political leadership than for his personal history.

He was born Oct. 18, 1932, in Kaunas, which was then the capital of Lithuania during its short-lived independence between the world wars. Vilnius, the current capital, was then part of Poland.

He is a Protestant, who began the



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day of independence by praying in the Vilnius cathedral.

His spacious apartment here where he lives with his second wife, Grazina, is crammed with vases, crystal and antiques that his family hid during the nationalization of property after Moscow took power here in 1940.

His paternal grandfather was a journalist and playwright, who fought Czarist rule in the late 19th century by writing for an underground newspaper in the outlawed Lithuanian language. He was imprisoned and deported for his nationalism.

Mr. Landsbergis's father was an architect who fought in the underground against the Nazis in World War II, and Vytautas was 11 when his teen-age brother was arrested by the Nazis for organizing pro-Lithuanian demonstrations.

Mr. Landsbergis is an accomplished pianist and musical theoretician, who has recorded two albums and written nine books, in addition to teaching at the Lithuanian conservatory.

"Landsbergis is too much a Lithuanian to ever betray us or compromise," said Maria Stankaviciene, a Lithuanian schoolteacher.